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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 005632

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/23/2015

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SUBJECT: CDA DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITH MINISTER AYDIN

REF: ANKARA 2313

Classified by CDA Nancy E. McEldowney; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (U) Summary: CDA emphasized to State Minister Aydin during a September 21 meeting the importance the USG places on religious freedom, and asked if he would join her in efforts to promote religious tolerance in Turkey. Aydin averred that he supports such efforts in principle, but they are politically difficult given the plight of Muslims in Western countries. CDA told Aydin the 2005 International Religious Freedom Report will be critical of Turkey. End Summary.

2. (U) CDA told Aydin, who oversees the GOT's Religious Affairs Directorate, that it is important for political leaders to demonstrate leadership by publicly supporting religious tolerance and acceptance of all faiths. CDA noted that on September 11, she participated in a ceremony at a memorial to Turkish security forces killed by terrorists. This type of gesture emphasizes the shared U.S.-Turkish struggle against terrorism. She asked whether Aydin would join her in similar efforts to express shared respect for religious freedom and diversity.

3. (U) Aydin averred that he supports such efforts in principle. However, politics places some restraints on what he can do. It would be politically difficult for him to publicly defend the rights of Christians in Turkey when Muslims face discrimination in Western countries. He noted that Ambassador Edelman had invited him to join him in a visit to a Protestant church in Ankara that had been firebombed (reftel). Aydin claimed that he "would gladly go," if only, for example, government officials in Holland would denounce the attacks on mosques in their country. He also said the Greek Government restricts the religious rights of the Muslim minority in Thrace, and asked why Christian leaders in Turkey do not denounce that situation. CDA replied that reciprocity is often cited in politics, but sometimes officials have to demonstrate leadership and take certain positions because they are right, regardless of the criticism they will draw from some quarters.

4. (U) CDA noted that the Appeal of Conscience Foundation is organizing a conference in Istanbul in November to promote interfaith dialogue, and that U/S for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Hughes will meet with representatives of different religions during her upcoming visit to Turkey.

5. (U) CDA told Aydin that the 2005 International Religious Freedom Report (IRF) will be released soon. This year's report will be critical of Turkey. The 2004 report noted improvements in respect for religious freedom, thanks to several legislative reforms. This year's report, however, will be different. This is largely due to the GOT's anti-missionary campaign, which coincided with an increase in threats against Christians and vandalism of churches.

6. (U) Aydin noted that Ambassador Edelman had already told him this year's report would be critical (reftel). He averred that in the past, when religious minorities in the U.S. had no problems, Turks took the IRF seriously. Now, he claimed, the U.S. is no better off than Turkey. "Muslims (in the U.S.) are dragged from their homes in the middle of the night," he said. "We are in the same boat." As a result, no one in Turkey pays attention to the IRF anymore.

Comment

7. (C) Aydin, a theology scholar, can talk a good game on religious tolerance, but it has become clear to us that he is not sincere. Though others in the Turkish government may prove more receptive, we do not expect him to support our efforts to promote religious tolerance.

MCELDOWNEY